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ABSTRACT

To investigate interpersonal communications networks within school staffs, researchers studied three aspects of teachers' relations with their colleagues in one urban elementary school. The three aspects included relaxing and chatting, consulting on student motivation, and consulting on student discipline. Through a sociometric questionnaire survey, data were gathered from all 36 staff members on their colleague relations, personal characteristics (such as sex, age, and marital status), teaching experience, status within the school's organizational hierarchy, attitudes toward student decision-making in class, and perceptions of school climate and of the principal's leadership qualities. The results indicated that the three aspects fell on a continuum from formal to informal colleague relations. Relaxing and chatting, at the informal end, occurred with colleagues of similar background, status, and perceptions. of school climate and of the principal's leadership qualities. The results indicated that the three aspects fell on a continuum from formal to informal colleague relations. Relaxing and chatting, at the informal end, occurred with colleagues of similar background, status, and perceptions. Consulting on student discipline fell at the formal end, occurring with colleagues of higher status. Consultations on student motivation appeared around the midpoint of the continuum, occurring with colleagues of the same sex but of higher status. (RW)

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# THE STRUCTURE OF COLLEAGUE RELATIONS IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL*

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*Paper presented at the Southwest Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Dallas, Texas, January 29-31, 1981.

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# THE STRUCTURE OF COLLEAGUE RELATIONS IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL


## Abstract

Data collected from all 36 certified staff members in an urban elementary school are analyzed to investigate the structure of three aspects of colleague relations: relaxing and chatting, consulting about student motivation problems, and consulting about student discipline problems. The findings indicate that these three aspects lie along a continuum from more informal to more formal. Informal colleague relations are structured around sharing a common "life space"; networks of colleagues here tend to be of the same sex and age group and to have "lived" in the school for a similar length of time. Formal colleague relations, in contrast, are structured by formal organizational stutus, with staff members tending to consult those in position of formal authority, in particular the principal. Consulting about student motivation problems, is located toward the middle of the continuum, being structured by a mixture of these two factors. Interestingly, sharing similar perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities constitute a basis for the two more informal aspects of colleague relations. However, it does not for the more formal aspect and staff members are equally likely to consult with the principal regardless of their perceptions of her leadership qualities. It is argued that knowledge of the structure of colleague relations can be helpful in making successful interventions in school- an important task particularly in urban areas.

# THE STRUCTURE OF COLLEAGUE RELATIONS IN AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL[1]

## Introduction

Understanding the nature of colleague relations in terms of the interpersonal communication networks among staff members in a school is an important topic for research in education today. A variety of writers have either documented or commented upon the salience of the teacher's colleague group (Eddy, 1969; Lacey, 1977; Levy, 1970; Metz, 1978; Lortie, 1975; McPherson, 1972; Warren, 1970). For instance, Hargreaves (1972:402) argues that:

> "The social relationships of teachers form an important part of the being a teacher; it is the teacher's colleagues who in many ways control his induction into the profession. The teacher's conception of himself, his values and attitudes to many aspects of education . . . may be influenced by his relationship with his colleagues and his superiors and thus influence the teacher's behavior in the classroom and his relationship with pupils."

These writers have also pointed to the sub-group nature of colleague relationships among teachers in any school. The question arises, therefore, as to the bases upon which such sub-groups form. Given that relations among colleagues in a school may or may not serve as "a valuable resource for establishing and maintaining high levels of professional effectiveness in teaching" (Doyle and Olszewski, 1975:278), it is necessary to understand the nature of the divisions (i.e., subgroups) among teachers. By gaining insights into the structure of consultation and more informal communication networks

among teachers, we apprehend more fully the limits and possibilities of the schooling process (Ginsburg, 1979 and 1980).

Studies of social interaction in various settings have documented the importance of similarity of attitudes, interests and situation as conditions of friendship and other types of social relationships (e.g. Homans, 1950). Differentation in these characteristics can also lead to attraction. Within a particular school the colleagues with whom a teacher consults about student motivation or discipline problems and with whom a teacher relaxes and chats during school hours may be structured by similarities and differences in terms of teachers' personal backgrounds, occupational experiences, perceptions of school climate, and orientations to teaching.

This study is addressed thus to answering the following question: Are the colleagues with whom teachers consult or relax and chat homogeneous or heterogeneous with respect to background, experience, school climate perceptions, and orientations to teaching?

## Method

Towards the end of the spring semester, 1979, questionnaires were administered to all certified staff members (n=36) in an urban elementary school. The questionnaire contained the following three sociometric choice items:

1. Please print the (first and last) names of the adults (if any) whom you are most likely to relax and chat with during school hours.

2. Please print (first and last) names of the adults (if any) whom you are most likely to talk with if you have some students who are difficult to motivate.

3. Please print the (first and last) names of the adults (if any) whom you are most likely to talk with about how to handle a student discipline problem.

Following Bishop (1977) and Greenberger and Sorenson (1970), we distinguished between "friendship" colleague relations (question 1) and "consulting" relations (questions 2 and 3). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for the responses to each sociometric question.

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TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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Other data were collected for use in analyzing the bases of the responses to these three sociometric choice items. These data entailed: (1) background information (sex, age, marital status, children); (2) teaching experience information (highest degree, years of teaching experience, years in present school, position in school hierarchy, teacher organization membership); (3) reported philosophical orientations to teaching in terms of a pupil involvement in classroom decision-making, and types of objectives stressed (Bishop, 1977); (4) perceptions of four aspects of school climate: leadership qualities of principal, teacher colleague relations, instruction related teacher-student relations, and teacher-student relation of a more personal variety. See Table 2 for summary statistics for each variable.

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TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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Using the chi-square procedure, first proposed by Blau (1962) and later employed by Greenberger and Sorenson (1970), data were analyzed in terms of whether characteristics (such as sex, years of teaching experience, school climate perception, etc.) have either

"differentiating" or "segregating" effects on responses to each of the three sociometric choice items (relax and chat, talking about student motivation problems, talking about student discipline problems).

As Greenberger and Sorenson (1970:199) explain an attribute or a characteristic has a segregating effect of choices "when individuals with attribute A [e.g., females] tends to overchoose others with the same attribute, while non-A individuals [e.g., males] underchose those with A. . . [An] attribute may have a differentiating effect . . . when everybody [regardless of length of teaching experience] over-chooses individuals with that attribute" [e.g., more years of teaching experience]. More specifically, Blau (1962:46) proposes that: "The criterion of a differentiating effect is that the difference between actual and expected choices in the <u>column</u> totals is greater than one that would occur by chance in one case out of twenty . . . The criterion of a segregating effect is that the difference between actual and expectuted choices within and outside the main diagonal is greater than one that would occur by chance in one case out of twenty." Greenberger and Sorenson (1970:203) point out: "If neither of these criteria is met we shall say that there is no effect of that attribute on the choices made. It is, of couse, possible that a distribution of choices will elicit a significant value of the chi-square of both criteria. In that case, the observed effect is a mixture of the two pure cases discussed above."

Findings and Discussion

The results of the data analysis, addressing the question of the similarity or differences among colleagues who interact with each other, are presented in Table 3. In discussing the findings from this analysis,

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TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

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comparisons will be made with findings from two similar studies: one conducted in a suburban junior high school with 75 certified staff in the northeast of the United States (Greenberger and Sorenson, 1970) and the other carried out in two middle schools (A and B) with 17 and 21 "certified" staff, one in a middle class, suburban, commuter village, and the other in a working class, council estate, respectively, in the Midlands of England (Ginsburg, 1979 and 1980).[2]

## FRIENDSHIP RELATIONS

Looking first at the segregating and differentiating effects of various characteristics on "relax and chat" sociometric choices, one observes that staff who are of the same sex, similar age, who have worked in the school for a similar period of time, and who share similar views on the leadership qualities of the principal, are significantly more likely to relax and chat during school hours than staff who differ on these characteristics. These significant segregating effects on the relax and chat item choices provide some indication of the nature of informal relations in the school. It is important also to note two differentiating effects: younger staff and those who have been at the school for fewer years are more often nominated on this sociometric item.

The segregating effect of sex and the segregating and differentiating effects of age on relax and chatting behavior parallel the results of Greenberger and Sorenson's (1970) and Ginsburg's (1979) findings. The study of the two English middle schools, (Ginsburg, 1979) also yielded no effects of either marital status or teacher organization membership. Greenberger and Sorenson (1970) similarly found no effect of position in the school heirarchy, though Ginsburg (1979) found a segregating effect for this variable in School B. The findings in Table 3 also differ from Ginsburg's (1979) study in that years of teaching experience had a segregating effect for School B and years in present school had no segregating effect.

Interestingly, only one of the attitudinal variables has any relationship with "friendship" type sociometric choices. Perceptions of the principal's leadership quality may be the only occupationally-related attitude (among those included in this study) which influences informal relations in this school, or it may be the one which is most publicized (among teachers) and thus easier for a teacher to take into consideration when deciding with whom to relax and chat. Other attitudinal dimensions might serve to segregate teachers if colleagues' attitudes were generally known. (See Sharp and Green, 1975, for a discussion of the solidarity-inducing implications of teachers keeping private their differing views on implementing "progressive" education in their classrooms.)

## CONSULTATION RELATIONS

One notes in Table 3 that staff are more likely to talk about student motivation problems with another staff member who (compared

to the staff as a whole) more often is married, has earned a Master's degree or higher, has more years of teaching experience, but has taught in the school for fewer years, holds a higher position in the school heirarchy (viz., principal), perceives colleague relations to be less positive, and perceives teacher-student relations of a personal form to be less extensive. These differentiating effects on choices pertaining to consultations about student motivation problems are mirrored by differentiating effects on consultations about student discipline problems, with the exception of the years in school variable. Additional differentiating effects on the "talking about student discipline problems" item choices involve the following variables: perceiving the leadership qualities of the principal as lower, perceiving instruction-related teacher-student relations as more positive, and preferring instructional objectives which focus on exploring and synthesizing rather than on acquiring facts. Two segregating effects on the "talking about student motivation problems" item choices should be mentioned as well. These involve people tending to consult other staff who are the same sex and who share similar perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities.

These results coincide with Greenberger and Sorenson's (1970) and Ginsburg's (1979) with respect to a lack of effect of either age and teacher organization membership on either consultation sociometric choice and to a lack of effect of years in present school on the "talking about student discipline problems" sociometric choices. Further, in both English middle schools, it was found that position in the school hierarchy had a differentiating effect, though in the American junior high school this variable had a segregating effect

on consultation relations. For the sex variable, Ginsburg (1979) found a segregating effect for School B, while Greenberger and Sorenson (1970) found a differentiating effect on the consultation-type sociometric choices. The findings presented in Table 3 also differ from those observed in the two English middle schools because Ginsburg (1979) observed no effects on consultation choices for marital status, years of teaching experience, and years in present school.

In contrast with the findings for relax and chat choices, the attitudinal variables are related to choices on both consultation-type sociometric questions, particularly the one focusing on talking about student discipline problems. It is also this sociometric question, and to a somewhat lesser extent the other, which elicited a very high proportion of nominations of the principal.[3] Thus, the observed differentiating effects on both consultation-type choices are at least partly artefactual, stemming from the characteristics of the frequently chosen principal.

Note also the segregating effect of "perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities" on consultations about student motivation problems, and recall a similar finding for relax and chatting behavior. It is interesting, however, that while this attitudinal diversion is important in outlining boundaries for staff interaction networks for the less formalized communication areas,[4] it is not significantly related to whether faculty members consult the principal about student motivation or discipline problems. The Pearson product-moment correlation between perception of the principal's leadership qualities and whether or not the principal is named on the motivation and discipline

sociometric questions are -- .05(p=.39) and .04(p=.40), respectively. Thus, the more informal staff communication networks cluster around similar (positive and negative) attitudes about the principal's leadership qualities, but such attitudes do not affect whether teachers look to the principal as source of assistance in problems related to their teaching tasks. Either assessments of the principal's competence and experience in these teaching-related areas and her more general leadership qualities are not perceived to be related, or staff members follow the norm of consulting the principal regardless of how competent they perceive her to be.

Conclusions

The findings from data collected from all certified staff members in an urban elementary school indicate that the dichotomy of "friendship and "consulting" relations or of "sociable" and "instrumental" sociometric choices (e.g. see Greenberger and Sorenson, 1970) actually identifies a continuum. Relax and chatting behavior being toward the more informal end and consulting about student discipline problems being toward the more formal end of this continuum. Consulting about student motivation problems appears to be closer to the middle, although on the more formal side.

In examining the findings in Table 3, one observes that colleagues chosen to relax and chat with tend to share the same personal "life space" as the chooser. Networks of colleagues who relax and chat together tend to be of the same sex and age group and to have "lived" for a similar period of time in the particular school. At the other end of the continuum, colleagues chosen as someone to talk to about student discipline problems seem to be most easily characterized by

their higher formal organizational status as compared with the chooser. Notable on the responses to this sociometric item is the concentration of choices on the principal. The analysis of responses to the "talking about motivation problems" produces a mixture of these two poles. Colleagues who are so consulted tend to be of the same sex, but of higher organizational status, than the chooser.

While the formal nature of consultations about student motivation problems is evidenced by the number of parallel differentiating effects and by the extent of such choices directed to the principal. The less formal nature of such consultations, compared to those about student discipline problems, is indicated by the fact that the principal is chosen somewhat less frequently and by the segregating effect of perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities. In the more formalized relations involving consultations about student discipline problems, similarity in views of the principal's leadership qualities do not serve to bring colleagues together. Rather such consultation tend to be focused on certain individuals (in this case, primarily the principal), who happen to have certain perceptions of the principal's leadership qualities.

In conclusion, we would offer that analyses such as the one presented in this paper can help to provide a clear picture of what a school is like to work in, and how the formal organization of the school does and does not structure the nature of various aspects of colleague relations. Furthermore, given recurrent concerns about schooling in urban areas, interventions in such schools can benefit from knowledge of teacher subgroups, whose members differ in their background, experiences, perceptions, and orientations. The structure of colleague relations constitute an important context of such efforts and thus they should be understood.

## FOOTNOTES

[1] The research reported herein constituted part of a pilot study conducted in conjuction with the evaluation of the University of Houston/Houston Independent School District Teacher Corps Project, Program 1978, funded by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The school involved, however, is not one of the Project's target schools.

[2] Greenberger and Sorenson's (1970) research included two relevant sociometric questions, one focusing on personal liking and the other on general consultation, and investigated the segregating and differenting effects of background variables (age and sex) and a teaching experience variable (position in school hierachy). Ginsburg's (1979) study included 3 sociometric questions, which are almost identical to those used in the study reported herein, and investigated the segregating effects (only) of background variables (sex, age, and marital status) and teaching experience variables (years of teaching experience, years in present school, and teacher organization membership). Differentiating as well as segregating effects were also examined for the teaching experience variable, position in school hierarchy.

[3] The principal received 19.6 percent of the nominations on the "talking about student discipline problems" sociometric question and 14.6 percent of the nominations of the "talking about student motivation problems" sociometric question. Note that the principal constitutes approximately 2.8 percent of certified staff members in the school. Another way of looking at it is that the principal received nominations from 54 percent and 40 percent of the other staff members on the discipline and motivation consultation sociometric questions, respectively.

[4] The differentiating effect of "perceptions of the principal's leadership quality" on consulting about discipline problems is the exception. This seems to occur because such consultations are more likely to be formally structured in schools (see also Ginsburg, 1980). As in indicated in Footnote 2, this consultation sociometric question yielded a stronger concentration of choices on the principal. It is also noteworthy that the principal expressed one of the lower estimates of the principal's leadership quality, thus yielding the specific differentiating effect observed in Table 3.

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Table 2: Summary Statistics for Background, Teaching Experience, School Climate Perceptions, and Teacher Orientation Variables*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Background** | | | |
| Sex | Male=16.7% | Female=83.4% | |
| Age | $\bar{x}$=40.0 | s=18.5 | |
| Marital Status | Married=55.6% | Single=36.1% | Other=5.6% |
| | No Response=2.8% | | |
| Have Children | Yes=58.3% | No=36.1% | No Response =5.6% |
| **Teaching Experience** | | | |
| Highest Degree | MA(+)=22.2% | BA(+)=19.4% | BA=38.9% |
| | BA(-)=8.3% | No Response=11.1% | |
| Years in Teaching Experience | $\bar{x}$=9.8 | s=8.0 | |
| Years in Present School | $\bar{x}$=4.0 | s=3.3 | |
| Position in School | Principal=2.7% | Teacher=52.8% | |
| | Teacher Specialists=33.3% | Aides=11.1% | |
| | No Response=11.1% | | |
| Teacher Organization | HTA=47.2% | CHT=11.1% | No Organization=41.7% |
| **School Climate Perceptions** | | | |
| Leadership Qualities of Principal | $\bar{x}$=19.0 | s=4.0 | $\alpha$-.50 |
| Teacher Colleague Relations | $\bar{x}$=13.2 | s=3.2 | $\alpha$=.53 |
| Teacher-Student Relations: Instruction | $\bar{x}$=16.4 | s=3.7 | $\alpha$=.62 |
| Teacher-Student Relations: Personal | $\bar{x}$=14.7 | s=3.2 | $\alpha$=.59 |
| **Teacher Orientation** | | | |
| Pupil Involvement in Classroom Decisions | $\bar{x}$=17.6 | s=3.7 | $\alpha$=.53 |
| Instructional Objective | $\bar{x}$=8.8 | s=2.9 | $\alpha$=.59 |

* Symbols in the table have the following meanings:

$\bar{x}$=mean; s=standard deviation; HTA=Houston Teachers Association (affiliated to NEA) Texas State Teachers Association); CHT=Congress of Houston Teachers; $\alpha$=reliability (internal consistency coefficients).

Table 3: The Bases of the Structure of Colleague Relations: Segregating and Differentiating[2] Effects of Background, Teaching Experience, School Climate Perceptions, and Philosophical Orientations to Teaching on Three Types of Sociometric Item Choices

| Variable[3] | Sociometric Item: Relax & Chat | Talking About Student Motivation | Talking About Student Discipline |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Background** | | | |
| Sex | S* | S** | -- |
| Age (younger) | S*/D* | -- | -- |
| Marital Status (married) | -- | D* | D** |
| Have Children | -- | -- | -- |
| **Teaching Experience** | | | |
| Highest Degree (Masters or Higher) | -- | D** | D** |
| Years of Teaching Experience (more) | -- | D** | D** |
| Years in Present School (fewer) | S*/D* | D* | -- |
| Position in School Hierarchy (principal) | -- | D** | D** |
| Teacher Organization Membership | -- | -- | -- |
| **School Climate** | | | |
| Leadership Qualities of Principal (lower) | S* | S* | D** |
| Teacher Colleague Relations (lower) | -- | D* | D** |
| Teacher-Student Relations: Instruction (higher) | -- | -- | D** |
| Teacher-Student Relations: Personal (higher) | -- | D* | D** |
| **Teacher Orientation** | | | |
| Pupil Involvement in Classroom Decisions (higher) | -- | D** | D** |
| Instructional Objective (emphasis on exploring/ synthesizing rather than acquiring facts) | -- | -- | D** |

1. A significant segregating effect (S* or S**) is when respondents significantly overchoose persons who have the same attribute (e.g., female) on a particular variable as they do.

2. A significant differentiating effect (D* or D**) is when respondents (regardless of their attributes on a certain variable--e.g., length of teaching experience) significantly overchoose persons who have one particular attribute (e.g., a longer period of teaching experience).

3. Attribute listed in parenthesis after variable name is the attribute overchosen when a differentiating effect is observed.

*A significant effect (either differentiating or segregating) chi-square procedure (see Greenberger & Sorenson, 1970) with $P \leq .05$.

**A significant effect (either differentiating or segregating) determined by a chi-square procedure with $P \leq .01$.